Missing child

Description

Missing child

CRITICALACTIONS·Repeated Behaviours and Recurring Themes
https://sparksfostering.org/wp-content/uploads/speaker/post-5244.mp3?cb=1717412422.mp3

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Statutory requirement
This page sets out Sparks Fostering's statutory obligations in relation to **children who go missing from the fostering home**. Everyone at Sparks Fostering is expected to work to what is set out here.

Where it comes from: regulation 13(3) of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011. Standard 5 of the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards. **And the statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care.**

What to do when a child goes missing — and what to do long before it happens. Why children in our care go missing, and the risks to them while they are. How care planning reduces those risks. And every step from the moment a child is thought to be missing to the independent return interview once they are home.

What these words mean



Children.

When we say “children” we mean anyone up to the age of 18.

Missing.

A child whose whereabouts cannot be established, where it is out of character for them. Or where the circumstances suggest they may be the victim of a crime, or at risk of harm to themselves or to others.

Absent.

A child who is not where they are expected or required to be, but where the circumstances suggest a lower level of risk.

Away from the fostering home without authorisation.

A looked after child whose whereabouts **is** known, but who is not at home or where they are expected to be. Either the carer is concerned, or the local authority or the police have been told.

The police would not treat these children as missing or absent, because it is known where they are — even where that is a worry in itself.

Children living out of area

Where a child lives outside their own local authority area, their social worker makes sure they can still get the services they need. It is the child's social worker who notifies the host authority and the other specified services.

Sparks works to the local and host Runaway and Missing From Home or Care protocols.

Why children in our care go missing

A child may be missing for a few minutes or for weeks. **However short it is, carers tell the child's social worker and the Sparks social worker straight away.**

Running from something.

- **Problems at home** — long-term abuse or maltreatment, or neglect.
- **Family break-up** — a young person pulled into their parents' conflict.
- **Mental and emotional health.** A disproportionate number of young people who run away have a mental health problem.
- **Problems at school** — with teachers or other pupils, or not attending after an exclusion, a withdrawal by a parent, or removal from the roll with no named destination.
- **Bullying.** A child being bullied is more likely to run.
- **Pregnancy.** Some young women run away, or are made to leave, because they are pregnant or fear they are.

Running towards something.

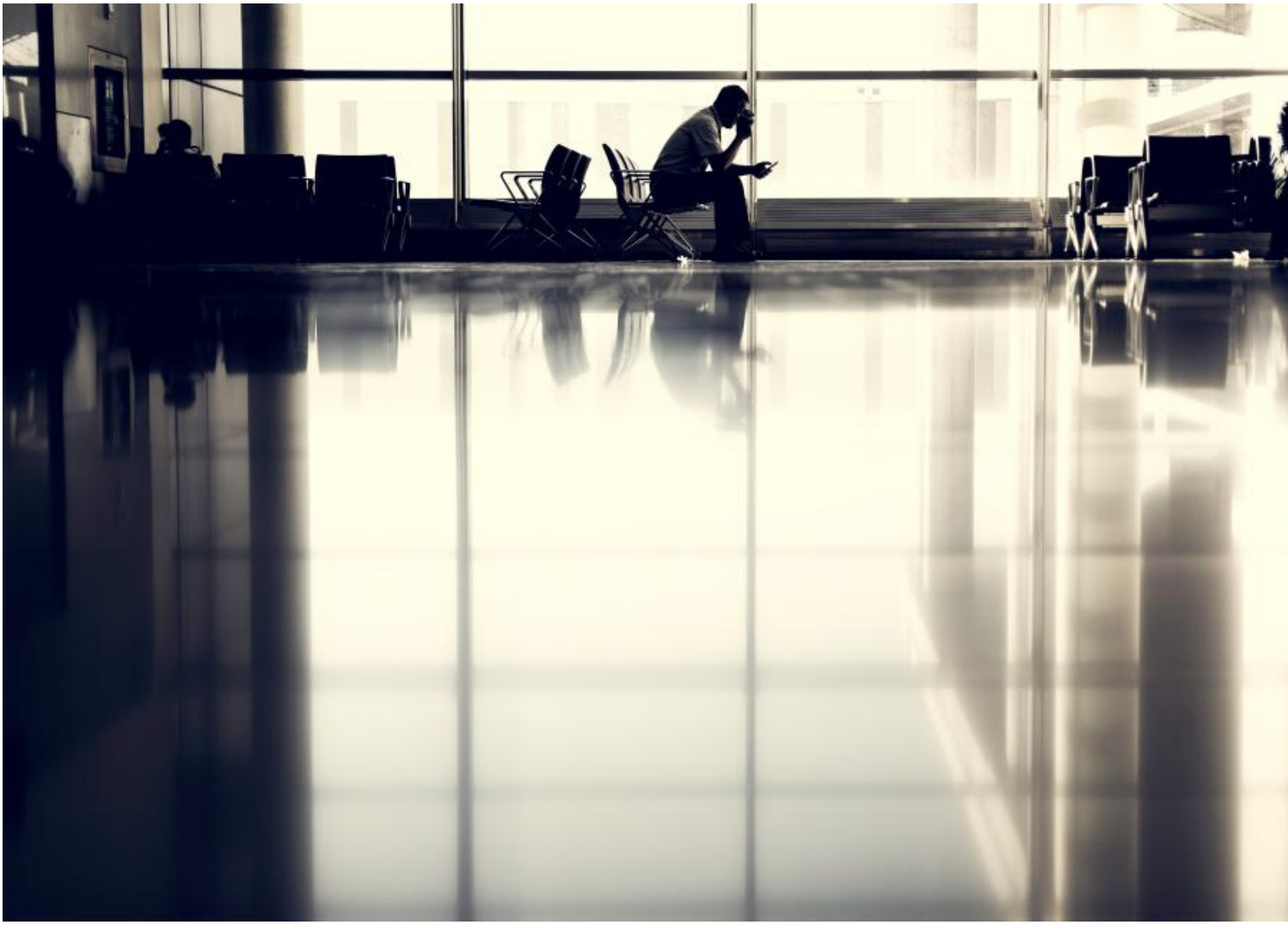
- **Family and friends** — especially a child in care where the family time arrangements are not working.
- **Grooming for sexual exploitation or trafficking.** Someone with power or control over the child makes them go.
- **Criminal exploitation** — the pull of money or goods, and threats to the child or their family.
- **Where they are developmentally** — wanting independence, not yet reading risk, not seeing the consequences.

The risks to children who are missing

Around a quarter of children who go missing are thought to be at risk of serious harm.

The clearest link is with sexual exploitation. A child who is missing is also exposed to criminal exploitation, to gangs, to violence, and to drugs and alcohol.

Looked after children who may have been trafficked from abroad



Some looked after children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or other migrant children. Some have been trafficked into the UK, and some are still under their traffickers' influence while they are looked after.

Trafficked children are at high risk of going missing. Most go missing within a week of becoming looked after. Many go within 48 hours.

An unaccompanied migrant or asylum-seeking child who goes missing straight after becoming looked after is treated as a potential victim of trafficking.

Assess immediately.

The assessment behind the care plan matters more here than anywhere, and it has to be done at once — the window to act is very narrow. It should establish:

- The child's background before they came to the UK.
- Why they came.
- How vulnerable they are to staying under a trafficker's influence.

Immigration staff who specialise in trafficking can advise on whether what is known about a child fits the profile of someone who has been trafficked.

The child may need to be somewhere safe before any assessment happens. And they may not be able to tell anyone the full story straight away.

Keeping the child's location safe.

Carers do not tell any enquirer where the child is. Redirect them to the child's social worker, who will establish who they are and what their relationship to the child is — with the police and immigration services where that is needed.

Who does what in this situation must be understood by everyone and written into the placement plan. Proportionate safety measures go in alongside it, in the child's best interests, to stop them going missing or being trafficked again.

The local authority keeps sharing information with the police and immigration staff — about possible crimes against the child, risk to other children, and any other relevant immigration matter.

Where to go for help.

- Safeguarding children who may have been trafficked — practical government guidance.
- The National Referral Mechanism. Where trafficking is suspected, the child's social worker refers the child into the NRM, the UK's framework for identifying victims.
- The Trafficked Children Toolkit — for assessing these children's needs and referring them to the NRM.
- NSPCC child trafficking advice — specialist advice where you are worried a child may have been trafficked.
- The NSPCC guide for children, explaining what the trafficking centre does.

Reducing the risk of the children in our care running away

Where it is known at matching that a child is at risk of running away, we look for a fostering home that reduces that risk.

The care plan sets out what needs to be in place to keep the child safe and make it less likely they go missing.

Distance matters. A decision to place a child far from home has to rest on an assessment of what that child needs — including being effectively safeguarded. Distance from home, family and friends is one of the strongest factors behind children in care running away.

So does being listened to. The Children's Rights Director found in 2012 that one of the biggest reasons children run is a sense of not being listened to or taken seriously. Particularly about where they live, and about moves.

Care planning, placement planning and reviews

The care plan should carry a detailed assessment of what the child needs — including a home that protects them from harm.

When a child goes missing, the statutory review of their care plan is the place to look at why. The child's social worker arranges it. It should produce a strategy to make a repeat less likely, and it should pick up any vulnerability to sexual exploitation, trafficking, or criminal or gang involvement. Whatever needs doing to keep the child safe goes into the care plan.

The police and the other agencies involved should get the chance to contribute to the review.

Where a child already has a pattern of running away, the care plan needs a strategy to keep them safe and reduce the chance of it happening again. Agree it with the child and their carers as far as you can, and be specific about what each service, the child's parents and the other adults in the family network are responsible for.

The child's social worker tells the Independent Reviewing Officer about every missing episode and every unauthorised absence, and the IRO takes them up at the statutory review.

What the risk assessment and the plan should cover.

- What triggers an absence or a missing episode.
- The risks to the child, to the public and to the carer — before, during and after an episode, including being picked up.
- What can be done to make it less likely the child goes, is harmed, or harms anyone else.
- Friends' and family's names and numbers, and the addresses the child is usually found at.
- What is expected of the young person.
- The practical sequence: when the police are called, what happens after an incident, who collects the child, who does the immediate assessment on their return, and the arrangements for the full return interview.
- The rules on staying overnight at a friend's and going on trips.

Overnight stays.

Young people raise this more than almost anything else — they want to do what their friends do. **Decisions about overnight stays should normally be delegated to the foster carers**, and that delegation is written into the placement plan.

There is no statutory duty to DBS check adults in a private household where a child may stay overnight. So restrictions should only be put on a looked after child where there is an exceptional reason.

Talking to the child.

Where a carer thinks a child may go missing, help the child understand how it could affect them. The child has to feel heard and understood, and has to see that the carers and the team around them are working together for them — not against them.

Care planning may also agree that the police should know about a child at high risk of going missing. Officers may point social workers to their local Philomena Protocol.

Sparks Fostering recordings

Write it down at the time. Carers and Sparks social workers record every absence and every missing episode, and anything that suggests a child may be about to go — a conversation, an incident, a change in who they are spending time with.

The carer and the supervising social worker keep those records up to date between them, and the supervising social worker shares them with the child's social worker.

Reacting to a child who is about to leave



Carers follow the behaviour management policy when a child is about to leave the home, or is already going.

A carer cannot physically stop a child leaving. Talk to them, and try to help them see why going is likely to do them harm.

The one exception: a carer may physically restrain or limit a child's movement where the child is in immediate physical danger, or is causing harm to someone else.

What to do.

- **Tell the child's social worker and the Sparks social worker** as soon as you know the child is about to go, or has gone.
- **Follow the child** where it is safe and possible to do so.
- **Keep the child's social worker updated** on where things stand, so they can advise and get support out to you as quickly as possible.

The child’s social worker will tell the carer whether the police are to be called.

When it’s suspected that a child may be missing

Before reporting a child missing, check.

- The house — including anywhere in it the child might be hiding.
- The garden, garage, sheds, grounds and the area around.
- Try the child directly: phone, text, social media.
- Try anyone they may have been in touch with, such as friends.

If you find them, do not report them missing — unless there is a real safety problem with where they are.

Where there is, tell the child’s social worker immediately. They will ask the police to do a “concern for welfare” address check.

If a child is found but will not come back, the police can be asked to help bring them home safely. **But a child is never reported missing just to get the police involved in bringing them back, or as a way of managing behaviour.**

Risk assessment following a child going missing

When a child in our care is absent or missing, **the child’s social worker decides whether the police need to be told.**

The police treat every child categorised as **missing** from home or care as medium or high risk. Where a child is categorised as **absent**, the police record the details and agree review times and next steps with the family, the carer or the responsible authority.

High risk.

A missing child incident is high risk where any one of these applies:

- The risk is immediate and there are substantial grounds to believe the child is in danger because of their own vulnerability.
- The child may have been the victim of a serious crime.
- The risk is immediate and there are substantial grounds to believe the public is in danger.

High risk means police resources are deployed straight away. The child’s social worker then liaises with the police and keeps the carer and the Sparks social worker up to date.

Medium risk.

The child’s social worker and the police work out a strategy together, and tell the carer and Sparks staff

what to do next.

When a child is found

When a missing child is found, **the carers collect them** — unless the circumstances would put the carer at risk.

One important exception. Where a child is accommodated under section 20, parental responsibility stays with the birth family. So if the child has gone back to them, children's services has no legal power to bring the child back to the fostering home. The local authority can take steps to obtain parental responsibility, or to remove the child in an emergency, if that is needed.

How the child is met matters.

The attitude of carers, police officers and social workers towards a child who has been missing shapes whether that child engages with the investigation and with the planning afterwards.

However streetwise a child seems, they are a child, and they may be extremely vulnerable.
A supportive approach — listening properly and responding to what the child needs — does more to stop it happening again than anything else.

Carers write down any conversation they have with a child about being missing or absent, and share it with the child's social worker and the Sparks social worker.

Safe and well checks



The police carry out a **safe and well check** as soon as possible after a child reported missing is found. It is there to:

- Look for any sign the child has been harmed.
- Establish where they have been and who with.
- Give the child the chance to disclose any offence — against them, or by them.

Where a child goes missing often, the police may not be able to see them every single time. The police and the child's social worker — or the parent, where they still hold full parental responsibility — agree a reasonable frequency between them.

That decision has to be made with the evidence in mind: children who go missing repeatedly are at higher risk of serious harm, including gang involvement, forced marriage, bullying and sexual exploitation.

Independent return interviews

When a child comes back, they must be offered an independent return interview. It is the chance to find out what would protect them. **From going missing again, from whatever they were exposed to while they were away, and from anything at home that is pushing them out.**

The child's social worker organises it. **If it is not offered, the carer and Sparks staff prompt them.**

It should happen **within 72 hours** of the child getting back.

Who does it, and where.

An in-depth interview, normally best done by someone independent — not one of the people caring for the child — who is trained for it and can follow up whatever comes out of it. Children sometimes need to build trust with a person before they will say why they ran.

It is held somewhere neutral, where the child feels safe.

What it has to achieve.

- Identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered. That includes harm not disclosed at the safe and well check, whether it happened before they ran or while they were away.
- Understand why they ran, and try to do something about it.
- Help the child feel safe, and see that they have options other than running.
- Give them information on staying safe if they do run again, including helpline numbers.

It is also where the risks and issues the child faced while missing get understood. Things worth exploring include whether the child:

- Has been reported missing twice or more.
- Is frequently away from home without authorisation.
- Has been hurt or harmed while missing.
- Is at known or suspected risk of sexual exploitation or trafficking.
- Is at known or suspected risk of criminal involvement or drugs.
- Is in contact with people who pose a risk to children.

Judging whether it will happen again.

That assessment rests on:

- The child's circumstances, their family's included.
- Why they ran.
- Where they might go, and who to.
- The recent pattern of absences.
- How they were found or how they came back.

- Who the child is — learning difficulties, mental health, depression, and other vulnerabilities.

Afterwards.

Once the safe and well check and the return interview are done, the child's social worker, the police, the carer and the Sparks social worker work together to build the full picture. Why the child went. What happened while they were away. Who they were with, and where they were found. And what support they need now they are back, in line with Working Together.

All of this feeds case planning and wider strategic planning, and it is how children's own views get taken into account. **So the outcomes of the checks and interviews go on the case file, where other professionals can see them.**

Carers, birth family and anyone else involved in the child's care are offered the chance to add anything they know. That is what prevents the next episode and gets support in place early.

Points to note

Ofsted's 2013 report **Missing Children**, on how local authorities handle children missing from home and care, found four things:

- Risk management plans for individual children were often not written, or not acted on.
- Children who ran away were often children who had been moved around a lot.
- Senior managers in local authorities were not routinely told when a child went missing.
- There was little evidence that safe and well checks or return interviews were happening.

What we do about each of those.

- **Risk management plans are reviewed at least every six months**, and whenever the risk to the child changes.
- Those plans carry real information and a clear plan for managing the risk — including who is doing what, and by when.
- **Carers report it when a child is unsettled**, to the child's social worker and the Sparks social worker. They then work with the carer and the child on a plan of support for both of them.
- Carers keep their recording up to date, and the Sparks social worker makes sure it reaches Sparks senior managers and the local authority social worker.
- **Sparks social workers and carers prompt the local authority social worker** to arrange the safe and well check and the return interview.

Sparks Fostering Safeguarding Lead

Tay Jiva MBE is the Safeguarding Lead and Registered Manager for Sparks Fostering.

The supervising social worker tells Tay about every absence and every missing episode.

A child missing from the fostering home is notified to the child's local authority, the local authority where the fostering home is, and the police.

It is a notifiable event under Schedule 7 to the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011. Tay decides and makes the notification.

It is notified to Ofsted only where it is a serious incident and the police are called to the fostering home. Where Ofsted is not notified, Tay records that it was considered, on what basis, and that no notification was made.

An absence is not a Schedule 7 event. Where one is reported, Tay records that a notification was considered, on what basis, and that none was made.

Tay keeps oversight of the child's care afterwards to make sure this policy is followed, and collates what we learn from missing episodes across the agency to improve how we all work.

If Tay is not available, the Responsible Individual decides and makes the notification instead. The Agency Decision Maker is told as well.

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Additional resources (optional)

Grouped by subject — open a heading to see what is in it. Each one says what it covers, so you can pick rather than work through the list.

The statutory guidance

The same guidance, hosted here

Before it happens

The Philomena Protocol form
The national police form, completed in advance so that the information the police need at three in the morning is already written down. It is for a child who has gone missing or where there is an identified risk they will — not for every child.

When a child goes missing from the fostering home
Our own guidance.

When they come back

Conducting good return home interviews
Our own guidance.

Centring the child
Missing People, on working with a child who goes missing repeatedly.

Runaway teenagers

Family Lives.

The full guidance, if you need the detail

Written for professionals and long. You do not need to read these to do the job — they are here for when a question turns on exactly what the guidance says.

Children who run away or go missing from home or care
The statutory guidance. Who must be told and when, the distinction between missing and away from placement without authorisation, and the independent return home interview within 72 hours of a child coming back.

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